

TF151: Half Pregnant, Double Hatted (and Two Faced)

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In early February 2003, then-Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) Ray Henault and his deputy, Greg Maddison [a former vice admiral], told Defence Minister John McCallum that the Canadian navy had an opportunity to lead a multinational naval Task Force [TF], which included U.S. ships and those of other countries not yet committed to an invasion of Iraq. Known as TF151, it would support Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) [i.e., the Afghan War], but would require a change in the area of operations for Canada's navy; the navy would move farther up into the Persian Gulf, very close to Iraq's territorial waters and a long way from Afghanistan. To lead this task force, Canada would have to deploy a destroyer, the HMCS Iroquois, with command and control capability. This meant a net gain for Canada of one ship in the region—two frigates and one destroyer—for six-months.

After McCallum had one or two more discussions with Henault and Maddison, it became apparent that TF151 would be *de facto*, if not *de jure*, "double-hatted." It would support OEF but would also probably provide some as yet undefined support to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

The multilateralists in Foreign Affairs, who were so deeply committed to the UN process on Iraq and strongly opposed Canada's involvement in the war without another UN resolution, might have been expected to dismiss leading this naval force. But Canada's senior diplomats held a much more pragmatic, Washington-centric view. Canada's ambassador to NATO, David Wright, urged McCallum to take on the leadership of TF151. Wright warned him that Canada would pay a price if it didn't double-hat its ships in the region. The senior Foreign Affairs mandarins were also generally supportive of leading TF151. They saw it as a demonstration of tangible support for the U.S. in the region and argued this

Canada's HMCS Iroquois and Regina warships were "double-hatted" to wage the Iraq and Afghan wars.

Top politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats and military brass all supported Canada's leadership of the multinational TF151 fleet even though they knew this would give Canada a lead naval role in the Iraq war.



DND Photo: Corp. Shawn Kent, May 6, 2003.

support was especially important given the likelihood that Canada would [officially] refuse participation in the Iraq war.

Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham reflected later on advice from senior officials in his department:

"The discussion centred around the problem, we're not involved in the Iraq campaign, what justification do we have to be involved in the naval operation? And our view was the naval operation dated from the original mission to restrain the Taliban and control al-Qaeda, and that therefore this was a legitimate presence in the Gulf for a different purpose. And for us to pull out at that time would have been highly aggravating to the Americans and our other allies.... One thing that certainly cinched it for me was there was a French vessel in the Task Force, so I said if the French can stay there—with all their Cartesian logic—we can do the same."²

Deputy Prime Minister John Manley subsequently made similar arguments. He thought that with the Iraq decision behind the government, "We've made our point with the Americans. A Canadian role in this naval task force," he said, "gives us something to point to with the Americans."³ Ottawa decided that Canada would assume command of TF151, and would worry later about how it would manage the problem of continuing to lead once the U.S. invasion of Iraq had begun.

Predictably, officials in the South Tower [i.e., the military leaders

within National Defence HQ] leaked the news. On February 11, *The Globe and Mail* reported that

"Ottawa and Washington have agreed that a senior Canadian officer will command all allied naval warships, aside from the U.S. aircraft carrier and its close escorts, in the Persian Gulf south of Kuwait Commodore Roger Girouard assumed command on Friday [February 7] of the new Task Force 151, which will be responsible for escorting ships, intercepting and boarding suspect vessels and guarding against attacks on shipping."⁴

The paper went on to point out that this initiative was part of a Canadian plan to increase preparations in anticipation of a war against Iraq and that 25 senior Canadian officers had been sent to a U.S. base in the Persian Gulf to plan for that purpose in Iraq.⁵

The *Globe* then went further:

"If war breaks out, the Canadian warships will, at the very least, start escorting civilian ships such as tankers..., which would be critical to the war effort. 'The region will be more dangerous,' Cmdre. Girouard said. 'We...would have to co-ordinate some escorts, in particular in the strait, by offering protection to ships and oil tankers.'"⁶

The Canadian Commodore suggested that were Canada to participate in the war against Iraq, the warships would likely escort ships farther north, closer to Iraq.⁶

The scene had been set, publicly, for controversy.

The South Tower Gets Uncomfortable

It wasn't until the end of February that the military leadership fully realized where the prime minister was going in his thinking about Iraq. When they did, Henault and Maddison shifted gears. They told McCallum that Canada would have to pull out of the leadership of TF151, which it had just assumed, if Ottawa was not going to participate in military operations against Iraq. Henault has since confirmed this advice to McCallum, but for an entirely different reason:

"Yes, I did recommend that we resign the leadership of TF151.... We had provided a very high level of support for naval operations. We needed to give the Navy time to reconstitute. The Navy needed a break in operational tempo."

But at this point the navy had only been involved in TF151 for a matter of days.

Lawyers were brought in to help navigate these treacherous waters. International lawyers in both the Department of National Defence and in Foreign Affairs believed that if TF151 were protecting ships involved in the invasion of Iraq, then Canada might legally

become a belligerent or a party to the conflict. "The Judge Advocate General [the top military lawyer] was not very popular with the CDS [Henault] when he gave these legal opinions," reflected McCallum.⁸ Graham went further:

"The tricky bit was we had some legal opinions intimating the fact that if we were there and were doing interdiction work, that we were at war with Iraq technically and legally, even though we were saying politically that we were not. This was very murky waters, there is no question about that."

Since Iraq interdiction work was likely to be part of the mandate of the naval task force, it seemed clear to officials in Defence that Canada would have to bow out. Or perhaps the Americans would save Canada the embarrassment and reassign the command of TF151 to a nation that was [openly and officially] part of the coalition.

Foreign Affairs thought differently on this issue from Defence. The diplomats were now deeply concerned about Canada-U.S. relations in the wake of the impending [supposed] "No" on Iraq. They saw Canada's leadership of TF151 as a way to mitigate

Washington's inevitable displeasure at Canada's [statement of] refusal to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

But the military leadership disagreed. What Foreign Affairs proposed was not feasible militarily and would be far too confusing operationally, they argued. A Canadian officer aboard a Canadian ship would be commanding the ships of other nations, including an American ship, involved in a coalition that was at war when Canada was not [officially] part of that coalition. To the military, such a position was untenable and, frankly, unimaginable. The senior military leadership also expected that Canada would be asked to leave [CENTCOM war planning HQ in] Qatar once active coalition operational planning began, if Ottawa did not officially support the Iraq war. This would have made leading TF151 impossible.

Clearly, the South Tower wanted the Canadian government to support the U.S. in its war against Iraq and to make a military contribution to the war effort. Initially, before Chrétien had made his decision on Iraq, Canada's generals and admirals probably thought that taking on TF151 would "help" the politicians make the "right"

"Naval commitment was most valued contribution Canada could make"



**John McCallum,
Minister of Defence**
(June 26, 2002 – Dec. 11, 2003)



"After McCallum had one or two more discussions with Henault and Maddison, it became apparent that TF151 would be *de facto*, if not *de jure*, 'double-hatted.' It would support OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom, i.e., the Afghan War] but would also probably provide some as yet undefined support to Op. Iraqi Freedom [i.e., the Iraq war]."

Then-Defence Minister John McCallum said that in February 2003, Air Force General Ray Henault, then Canada's Chief of Defence Staff, and his deputy, Vice Admiral Greg Maddison, the former head of the navy "wanted to be more heavily engaged [in Iraq] than I wanted them to be engaged. They were implicitly assuming we would be going with the Americans."

Henault stated that the U.S. was ready to begin military action against Iraq in one month. He claimed that a Canadian naval contribution, perhaps consisting of both frigates and destroyers, would be welcome in Washington. If Canada sent ships, it could support both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom [the Afghan and Iraq wars]—what the military calls a 'double-hatted task force.' *The general and his deputy felt that a naval commitment was the most valued contribution that Canada could make.*

Source: Excerpt, "Walking the Tightrope," *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, 2007.

“The tricky bit was we had some legal opinions intimating the fact that if we were there and were doing interdiction work [with TF151 in the Persian Gulf], that ***we were at war with Iraq technically and legally, even though we were saying politically that we were not.***”

Bill Graham, Minister of Foreign Affairs
January 15, 2002 - July 19, 2004



Clarity from the Allies, Contortions in Canada

The Dutch, New Zealanders, and French then clarified their positions. They ordered their naval commanders not to allow their ships in TF151 to operate in the Persian Gulf, so as not to support the war. They were also instructed not to engage with Iraqi vessels or vessels under

an Iraqi flag. But Canada’s naval commanders were not as lucky. In an effort to satisfy Ottawa’s political objectives in Washington, they now found themselves in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

The U.S. and other countries clearly saw the task force as doubled-hatted, serving both OEF [the Afghan and Iraq wars]. As a result, some countries chose to work under one hat only, and restricted their ships’ operations geographically to ensure that they provided no direct support to the [Iraq] war. Since Canada had command of the task force, it had no such luxury.

According to the official record, the Canadian navy somehow managed the seemingly impossible. It ran and participated in a double-hatted naval task force but [supposedly] did not get involved in command or operational responsibilities related to one of these hats. A very blurred line existed between OEF and OIF [i.e., the Afghan and Iraq wars], a blurriness that the U.S. probably deliberately encouraged.

References

References

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3. Paul Koring and Daniel Leblanc, “Canadian will Run Persian Gulf Naval Task Force,” *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 11, 2003, p. A1.
4. Ibid.
5. Daniel Leblanc, “Navy Will Pitch in if War Starts in Iraq,” *Globe and Mail*, February 14, 2003, p. A10.
6. Interview, Ray Henault, Op. cit
7. Interview, John McCallum, Feb. 7, 2007.
8. Interview, Bill Graham, Op. cit.
9. Cited by Allan Thompson, “Sailors Would Not Hand Over Iraqis,” *Toronto Star*, April 9, 2003, p. A12.

Source: Excerpts, “Half Pregnant,” *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, Viking Canada, 2007.

decision. Surely Canada could not continue to lead this task force and not be part of the Iraq coalition. And surely Canada would not pull its navy out of the task force days after it had assumed command. There was a black and white choice to be made. Military leaders hoped to create the enabling conditions for the outcome they wanted. They did not, however, consider the domestic political factors that weighed so heavily with Chrétien.

Officials in Foreign Affairs, unlike their colleagues in the South Tower, wanted it both ways. They did not want Canada to support the Iraq war without another UN resolution, which they considered highly unlikely. Yet they wanted Canada’s military to remain in the region to help manage the Ottawa-Washington relationship.

The prime minister eventually resolved the internal debate about Canada’s role in TF151. While Chrétien understood the difficulties, he did not want Canada to be seen to be leaving the Persian Gulf at that critical time. Chrétien was a pragmatist, and he wanted deft management of the highly charged issue of the role of Canada’s navy in the region. Ottawa would need to put a little water in its wine, take some political risks at home, and move forward with a somewhat less-than-coherent policy on Iraq.

In Ottawa, there was great angst among the military leadership that the prime minister’s [ostensible] opposition to the Iraq invasion made it impossible for Canada to retain the leadership of TF151. But the prime minister thought otherwise. His statement in the House of Commons indirectly revealed his predisposition: “We have ships in the area as part of our participation in the struggle against terrorism. Our ships will continue to perform their

important mission against terrorism.” That was the distinction. Canada would remain leader of TF151 but [supposedly] wear only one hat—the OEF [Afghan] hat—even though the military argued that separating the two [i.e., separating the Iraq and Afghan war functions of TF151] would prove almost impossible operationally.

Now that the policy with respect to TF151 was clear, NDHQ turned its attention to the challenging issues of implementation. Commodore Girouard was instructed that the Canadian navy was not to engage in activities associated with the invasion of Iraq. But the general instruction could not address myriad political and operational issues. Some Iraqis would flee once combat began. If a Canadian ship interdicted them, would they be returned to Canada or handed over to the Americans? Detainees from Iraq would have no legal status in Canada because Ottawa was officially not supporting the Iraq war. And were the Canadian navy to hand over an Iraqi national to the U.S., Canada would appear to be—and legally might well be—supporting the [Iraq] war. (See article on opposite page.)

These tortured scenarios illustrated Canada’s extraordinarily awkward position once it had decided to retain command of TF151. The contradictions were obvious and the wound was self-inflicted. At times the contortions of military leaders approached the comic. In April, after the war had started, Girouard was forced to make a bizarre public statement:

“There’s no doubt in my mind that if Saddam Hussein himself ... was found in a vessel that we stumbled upon for some reason, we would not knowingly let a member of that level of the regime go.”¹⁰